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ABSTRACT

This report by Wyoming's Blue Ribbon Committee on Quality Education focuses on four basic recommendations through which student preparation could be improved. First, the elementary, secondary, and college curriculum in the state needs to be better defined and integrated. Second, educational processes must make more effective use of available technology. Third, education must focus on preparing students to cope with technological and social change. Fourth, the general public must be encouraged to support efforts to achieve educational excellence at local and state levels. The report makes general recommendations in the areas of student use of time and making schools more effective, then provides 15 specific recommendations pertaining to elementary and secondary education, professional staffing, and state management of education. These specific recommendations concern high school graduation requirements, statewide program evaluation, college preparatory programs, college entrance requirements, basic skills education, development of thinking and problem-solving skills, curriculum integration, individualization of education, concern for the whole child, competency-based teacher employment, professional development for teachers, temporary certification, administrative accountability, state coordination of data collection, and development of a statewide electronic communication system for instruction. (PGD)

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A Report of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Quality Education in Wyoming

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QUALITY

Education in the Equality State

A Report of the
Blue Ribbon Committee on
Quality Education in Wyoming

Submitted to: Lynn Simons,
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
September 12, 1984

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PREFACE:

The achievements of our schools during the 20th Century have been a great American success story. In 1950, fewer than half of the nation's students graduated from high school. Today that figure is nearly eighty percent. American leadership in many fields stems in part from an ever increasing sophistication in the schools. The emergence of new technologies and concern for participation of women and minorities in new fields requires increased preparation of our students to meet present and future demands.

As this committee studied reports, sifted through evidence and heard from one-hundred twenty-five citizens across the state, it became clear that recommendations for change were in order. After long deliberation, the committee submits its recommendations to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, knowing that many of the recommendations will be controversial. But it is our belief that some basic changes in how education is delivered in Wyoming are needed.

The public schools play an important role in a rapidly changing world. Providing a quality education which meets the basic needs of a diverse school population remains a continuing priority. There are challenges and conflicts which must be addressed as schools move forward into the 21st Century.

An analysis indicates four basic areas where student preparation should be strengthened:

1 **A better definition and integration of the existing kindergarten through college curriculum is needed.** We must provide not only a solid academic foundation, but help students prepare for a much more complex world, a world in which global concerns and human relationships will play a significant role. Education must reflect an optimal balance between process, content and societal issues.

2 **Part of the changes in our society that must be reflected in the curriculum is a concern for technology.** Although technology is not an end in itself, computer literacy and other skills and knowledge related to mathematics and science must be incorporated into the existing course of study. Technology must become part of the process itself. Methods of using technological advances (computers, computer graphics, computer-managed instruction, etc.) as tools for group and self-instruction and problem solving need to be refined and used. There is also a need to use technology to deliver educational services. This requires planning and awareness on the part of teachers. The University of Wyoming, the community colleges, and the State Department of Education should take the lead in this area.

"Computer literacy and other skills... related to math and science must be incorporated into the existing course of study."

3 **To prepare students to use the technology and resources that will be crucial to the future, students need to think well.** The recently commissioned presidential report, "A Nation At Risk," in its list of implementing recommendations suggests that higher level thinking skills should be "vigorously addressed." Those skills include, among others: language arts (comprehension, interpretation, evaluation), mathematics (understanding, applying, estimating), science (methods of scientific inquiry, application of knowledge), and social sciences (goal setting, problem solving, decision making). These skills are necessary for all students: those whose future can be termed academic and those entering vocational fields. Research indicates that higher level

cognitive skills can and should be taught directly. Instruction in thinking skills should foster a higher quality and deeper level of verbal interaction between teachers and students. We feel that systematic direct instruction in higher order thinking skills is needed at all grade levels in the public schools, elementary through high school. Gifted programs should also be encouraged to expand upon thinking skills. A systematic attempt to teach and reinforce higher order thinking skills should begin with an intensive in-service and pre-service teacher training effort. A key component to any pre-service or in-service effort will be the identification of instructional models which incorporate higher order thinking skills instruction. Teacher preparation at training institutions must address instruction of students in cognitive skills. Likewise, existing staffs must address self-improvement. Workshops, in-service programs and teacher preparation should evaluate and develop approaches for improvement in this area.

"Priorities need to be established for resolving issues with major emphasis placed at the local level."

4. **Schools reflect the attitude of the community.** The importance of education needs to be clearly identified at the local, state and national levels. Priorities need to be established for resolving issues with major emphasis placed at the local level. Excellence in education comes largely from the teacher in a classroom at a local school, with strong support from the administration and the home. The public has the responsibility to demand excellence in education. Our educational and social systems must motivate the students and must demand excellence in return. This process begins in early childhood, continues throughout the school years, and carries on through life.

PART I. SCHOOL TIME/SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:

To accomplish improvements in these four areas changes will be needed at the secondary and elementary levels as well as at the university, professional, and state management levels. Before detailing recommendations in each of these areas two issues must be addressed system-wide: School Time and School Improvement.

School Time Recommendations

Valuable time is lost when students are not present in school and when time is taken away from classroom learning. To deal with this issue we recommend that attention be given to reducing absenteeism, time lost to out-of-school work, time off of school tasks, and to regular class time devoted to extra-curricular activities. In addition, time devoted to enrichment for students and staff development for faculty should be considered. Our recommendations in this area follow:

"We call for strong local policies including contractural agreements for students by teachers and parents..."

1 To reduce the problem of student absenteeism, students, teachers, administrators, and parents should become totally aware of attendance policies and expectations for all. We call for strong local policies including contractual agreements for students by teachers and parents, specifying high expectations in attendance.

The State Board, through the accreditation and evaluation of schools, should include steps taken against absenteeism as a goal. The Department of Education should take the lead in focusing attention on the problem, and in undertaking research to help solve it. Statutes and regulations should provide sufficient flexibility to explore scheduling alternatives which may effectively work toward eliminating absenteeism. If scheduling is altered, funding should continue through the Foundation Program.

2 Parents and businesses must be aware of the effect of excess working hours on students. During a school term, the most important task for each student is school. Therefore, we recommend that students be limited to a maximum of twenty hours employment weekly during the school term. Legislation may be necessary to limit child labor.

3 Districts, with leadership from the state level, should stress time management techniques in each school building and individual classroom to insure that time spent at school is as productive as possible. Principals and teachers, working together, must do everything possible to increase their efficiency. Time usage and time-on-task should be monitored as a regular part of management of schools.

"Time usage and time-on-task should be monitored as a regular part of management of schools."

4 We recognize that extracurricular activities are an important part of the educational program. It must be recognized that extracurricular activities, are, indeed, extra and must be kept in this perspective. At no time should they be allowed to detract from, rather than contribute to, the primary purpose of school. The committee recommends that the State Department of Education make a complete study of the impact of lost time by students and sponsors while participating in extracurricular activities. Further attention should be directed to the impact on hiring and retention practices, based on the need for activity sponsors.

5 Initial efforts should focus on making better use of the time available. Before or concurrently, consideration should be given to the extension of the school year. More time for educators to plan, to upgrade skills, and to improve communication within the education community should be built into school schedules. Extended time should be considered in two areas: extensive educator in-service training, and extended time for students for remediation or enrichment. State funding for this extension should be available.

School Improvement Recommendations

Every school should have a plan for and a regular program of school improvement. An important resource in developing school improvement activities would be the body of research on effective schools. That research points to a number of ways in which effective schools differ from their less effective counterparts. For example:

1 An effective school is one in which it is believed every child can be successful. That understanding is conveyed to children by all the adults in the building, with the support of parents and community.

2 An effective school provides an organizational climate in which students and teachers work together to support one another. An effective school is a safe, pleasant place to be.

3 An effective school monitors its effectiveness on student achievement and time usage. It checks to be sure that all students are succeeding at the desired level and takes positive action when they are not.

4 An effective school is always seeking ways to improve, continuously re-evaluating and reworking its program. Leadership exists to support these improvement efforts.

Many strategies are available to help schools make improvements in the directions suggested here. We recommend that the State Department of Education work to make them available to every district and that each board, superintendent, and staff take full advantage of them.

PART II. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

Specific recommendations pertaining to secondary schools, elementary schools, professional staff and state management follow.

Secondary Recommendations

1 **High School Graduation Requirements:** Criteria for high school graduation should require, as a minimum,

- Four years of language arts, each including grammar/writing skills;
- Two years of mathematics;
- Three years of social studies, including studies of the United States and Wyoming;
- Two years of science.

Care must be taken that courses which seek to fulfill each of these requirements reflect the content of four areas listed above.

These requirements should consist of a core for all students. As the core requirements are met, alternatives should be available that broaden the students' perspectives and prepare them for later life.

"Student introduction to the arts and humanities in school is an important contact."

Vocational/technical education should be an integral part of our educational system. Content should be shifted from preparing students for an industrial society to preparing them for a technological society. Vocational students too, must have a background in the academic areas.

The fine arts and humanities must not be neglected. We recognize their importance. They add an important dimension to student learning. Because we are essentially a rural state, student introduction to the arts and humanities in school is an important contact.

2 **State-Wide Assessments:** The committee recommends that the State Legislature provide both the responsibility and the power to the State Department of Education to insure that the graduation requirements are met by all school districts, and to include as part of those responsibilities the assessment of students in language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. Implementation of a State Department of Education Evaluation System to identify and enhance strengths, and to identify and remediate weaknesses, should be a legislative and departmental priority.

"...a State ...Evaluation System to identify and enhance strengths... should be a legislative and departmental priority."

3 **College Preparatory:** For students wishing to pursue an academic program, the following minimum recommendations are made.

- Four years of language arts, including writing and grammar;
- Three years of mathematics to include algebra and geometry;
- Students who completed basic mathematics courses prior to entering ninth grade should be encouraged to take more advanced courses as part of the three course sequence;
- Three years of social studies, including studies of the United States and Wyoming;
- Two years of science, during which the student must complete at least one lab science course;
- Two years of foreign language.

A college bound student cannot be said to have a well-rounded education without the arts and humanities in his or her background. Local districts should study this component of a total education and incorporate the arts into its program. In addition, college bound students should be given an opportunity to participate in vocational/technical programs, which can provide an important background in many fields.

4 **College Entrance:** Successful completion of a college preparatory program should be encouraged for entrance to the University of Wyoming, and in degree programs at the community colleges.

We recommend that a model be developed for assessing courses so that additional weight is given to more difficult courses. For example, students taking honors language arts courses should be given more recognition when calculating grade point averages than students who take the regular or the remedial course. This would encourage students to take more difficult, demanding and challenging courses without fear of impacting negatively on their grade point averages. It seems as though students have been substituting less rigorous courses in order to maintain a high grade point average.

Elementary Recommendations

Elementary education should be the basis for all that occurs in later education. With that in mind, we comment as follows:

1 **Basic Skills:** The traditional basic skills of reading, written and oral communication, and mathematics should be the backbone of the elementary school curriculum. Introduction to computers also should be considered a basic skill since today's children are living and likely will spend all of their lives in the computer age.

No other institution or agency in society can deal with basic skills as well as elementary schools. These skills remain so crucial that anyone who lacks any of them will have some jobs and opportunities closed that otherwise would be available. Deficiency in any of these skills will impair subsequent learning. A richer life can be lived when there is competence in basic skills.

"Teaching pupils how to think should be considered basic to an elementary school curriculum."

2 **Thinking and Problem Solving Skills:** Teaching pupils how to think, how to solve problems, and how to locate information should also be considered basic to an elementary school curriculum. Thinking skills, problem solving skills, and locational and reference skills are more important than learning information, much of which is quickly forgotten.

In addition, pupils should be taught how to think rationally and to make wise decisions. All of the information in the world will not solve the problems facing us. The elementary school program should be the major factor in influencing pupils to think rationally and wisely.

3 **Curriculum Integration:** The elementary school curriculum should be streamlined. During the past, approximately fifteen years, much has been added to the elementary school curriculum, but little if anything has been taken away. Local communities, and society in general, have asked the elementary schools to be responsible for teaching more topics that not many years ago were the responsibility of the home and/or other institutions and agencies in the community. There must be time for teachers to teach and pupils to learn that which is most important and that which is appropriate for elementary schools. The fine arts and physical education should be included as an integral part of the elementary school curriculum. An interest in and development of skills can lead to a rich, interesting, active, and healthful life.

4 **Individualization:** The elementary school curriculum should consider the various learning abilities and rates of its learners. Classroom instruction must be appropriate for the individual learner based on his/her own unique characteristics. Continuous evaluation of pupils should serve as a blueprint for personalizing instruction.

"The attitudes of teachers, administrators, and parents are keys to developing a positive interest in learning."

5 **Concern for the Whole Child:** A positive attitude toward learning and an interest in learning must be developed by elementary school pupils so that there is impetus for subsequent learning, both in and out of school. The attitudes of teachers, administrators, and parents are keys to developing a positive interest in learning.

The elementary school curriculum should be concerned with the total child, his or her emotional, psychological, and social well-being, as well as his or her intellectual growth. Teachers and other school personnel should promote the total well-being of pupils. Unless pupils are healthy emotionally, psychologically, and socially, intellectual growth will be impaired.

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Professional Staff

The professionals in education have come under increasing scrutiny as a result of several well-publicized reports. We know that there are many highly competent professionals in Wyoming's schools. To further upgrade and insure competency, the committee makes the following recommendations:

1 **In order to attract and retain highly qualified teachers to the profession, verifiable criteria for determining competencies should be developed and teachers rewarded with professionally appropriate salaries and incentives.**

The committee recommends that local school boards, the State Department of Education, and the legislature:

- Support a faculty-directed professional development program on the local level with State Department of Education leadership;
- Utilize a broad-based, local screening process for faculty selection, re-evaluation, retention, and dismissal;
- Identify and recognize educators within the profession across the state who exemplify high academic standards and professional skills, using, as nearly as possible, professional standards and criteria;
- Provide funding from the legislature in order to insure equity in local financial resources to provide professionally appropriate compensation;
- Maintain funding which allows salaries locally competitive with private industry professionals, good working conditions, professional development, and fully adequate support staff;
- To recognize educator professional excellence, grants should be provided for study leaves, curriculum development, skill development through class work, and to provide incentives for continuing education in specifically approved programs. Suggestions made by the Carnegie Study should be considered. Their suggestions include a two week teacher professional development term added to the school year, a school district teacher travel fund, and eligibility

"Grants should be provided as incentives for continuing education in specifically approved programs."

for a 12-month contract that would include a summer study term each five years. In addition, school districts should establish procedures to recruit skilled professionals to teach part-time.

2 **School trustees, administrators, teachers, and the State Department of Education should continue to participate in the development of a professional environment for teachers that includes establishment of baseline credentials respecting entry level professional certification and recertification. The criteria should include teacher training, competencies, and continuing education.**

Strategies should be developed to encourage effective partnerships between elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges. Approved teacher preparation institutions for those planning to teach in Wyoming should further address the following:

"Strategies should be developed to encourage effective partnerships between elementary and secondary schools and colleges."

- Continue the basic skills assessment and consider increasing the GPA requirement for entry into professional education training at the University of Wyoming's College of Education.

- Develop performance assessment procedures to evaluate students in practicums and student teaching. Encourage involvement of the State Department of Education in the development of instruments which may be used to evaluate individuals seeking certification in Wyoming.

- Greater emphasis must be placed on strengthening the preparation of teachers for elementary schools. Depth of knowledge in the traditional liberal arts and sciences as well as more emphasis on clinical experiences in working with children should be required.

- Insure that required professional education courses incorporate the most recent research on effective teaching and learning, as well as practice and experience in the teaching and reinforcement of higher order thinking skills.

- Develop a plan or program of study for degreed individuals with majors in the arts and sciences to meet teacher certification requirements within a one year period of time.

- Develop procedures to insure that Education and Arts and Sciences faculties, who are directly involved in working with future teachers, actually spend time working in the public schools.

- Restructure the undergraduate curriculum based on the following model: a) preschool/elementary certification which will encompass preschool through approximately grade five, b) middle school certification, grades six through eight, requiring major concentrations in content areas to be taught, and c) secondary certification, grades nine through twelve, requiring completion of a major in the content areas in which the individual is to be certified to teach.

"Candidates for certification should provide evidence of in-depth knowledge in the content areas."

- The College of Education at the University of Wyoming should provide cash stipends to supervising teachers who help train student teachers in the public schools, and should require a high degree of professional success by those selected to be supervisors.

- The State Department of Education should require that all individuals seeking certification in Wyoming be graduates of programs and institutions approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. In addition, all candidates for certification in Wyoming should be required to provide evidence of demonstrated skills in pedagogy. These skills may be certified by the institution of higher education with a prior program approval of the State Department of Education. Candidates for certification should also provide evidence of in-depth knowledge in the content areas in which certification and/or endorsements are being sought.

3 **Candidates for a teaching credential within the state should receive a temporary certificate for one year.** At the conclusion of the first year teaching in the state the superintendent or his designee would submit, in writing, an evaluation of the individual's performance to the State Department of Education. This evaluation* must be satisfactory in all areas before the initial credential can be issued by the State Department of Education. (*The areas of evaluation will have to be developed cooperatively between practicing teachers, practicing administrators, and the state.

Recertification and continuing professional education for recertification should include a majority of substantive courses and credits in the area of endorsement. This may also include transitional courses and credits for other areas of endorsement. Recertification training also should encompass both the areas of endorsement and areas which would improve teaching skills.

"...effective principals are goal and task oriented...and convey high, achievable expectations for students and staff."

4 **The active participation and involvement of school administrators, including principals, is indispensible to the creation and maintenance of a professional environment. The committee recommends that school administrators and principals should be held accountable for high professional standards within schools.**

We believe in and subscribe to the recent findings from research on effective schools which depict the building principal as the key individual providing leadership to the school. These studies have concluded that effective principals are goal and task oriented; convey high, achievable expectations for students, staff, and personal performance; spend a significant amount of time visiting classrooms for the specific purpose of performance assessment and instructional improvement; are participants in in-service training or activities directly related to program needs; and provide strong support or advocacy for their faculty.

It is our intent to encourage the continued support and development of principal preparation programs which produce principals who exercise assertive leadership in promoting achievement for all students.

We recommend that certification of school principals be based primarily on research findings on effective schools; that it be granted upon completion of a planned, sequential and approved program designed specifically for preparation of school principals. Such programs shall include education, training, and background in academic instruction in sufficient depth to result in observable performance skills, attitudes, goals, policies, and procedures promoting student learning.

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State Management

In addition to the state-focused recommendations made above, two additional ones are made—one in data base development and the other in state-wide electronic communications.

1 **We recommend that the Legislature take action to encourage the cooperation of the school districts in participating in data collection activities in the state.** Much of the demographic information concerning schools could be collected in the annual budget reports currently required by the Legislature. Because there is so little data upon which to evaluate schools and make decisions about education in the State of Wyoming, it is clear that we need a centralized data collection of information on students, courses taken, and basic skills mastered. We recommend that the Legislature delegate to the State Department of Education the necessary authority and power to develop an assessment program to assess basic and content skills of students both at the elementary (recommend fourth and eighth grade assessment) and high school (recommend eleventh grade assessment) levels. This data will indicate how students in Wyoming are doing in both the basic skills and content areas when compared with other students throughout the country. We further recommend that the State Department of Education involve the University of Wyoming in the collection, tabulation and reporting of the data. The assessment procedure, either selected or developed, should be administered by the State Department of Education at identified times, with the Legislature providing funding so that all districts are required to participate in the assessment process.

2 **The State Department of Education should study and plan for implementation of a statewide electronic communication system, to equalize educational opportunity for students and in-service training to all areas of the state.** Such a system could provide instruction to remote areas of the state that would not otherwise receive a comprehensive set of instructional offerings. It could also act as a valuable tool for strengthening in-service training for teachers and administrators.

CONCLUSION:

Education is a partnership; we all share in its success. For students and parents, education should be a top priority. For all segments of society, education is an investment in the future.

As with other reports of this nature, the committee is unable to address all specific issues. Among the issues not addressed are alternative education, use of libraries, transportation and others which arose during the public hearings. That does not mean those areas are not important, but are decisions of local importance. We feel that those decisions have been made, and will continue to be made on the basis of improving education for all children.

Special Education and its funding has had a considerable impact on improving education. Wyoming and the schools are to be commended for their efforts; in addition, state interest in gifted education is a step forward, and the state and local educational community should work to keep and strengthen this concept.

Each of those specific areas are components of an overall system, which contribute to the success of education. The broad concepts discussed in the report apply to all aspects of education. We recommend them to the people of Wyoming.

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